# DECISION NOTICE

## ROCK HARD

## Forest Plan Amendment 17

UMATILLA COUNTY, OREGON
USDA FOREST SERVICE
UMATILLA NATIONAL FOREST
NORTH FORK JOHN DAY RANGER DISTRICT

This Decision Notice documents the Forest Service decision to implement salvage harvest within the area described in the Rock Hard Planning Area Environmental Assessment (EA) and as displayed on the attached map.

The information in this document is described in more detail in the EA and analysis file. It documents the analysis of the area and is available for public review in the Forest Supervisor's Office in Pendleton, Oregon, and at the North Fork John Day Ranger District in Ukiah, Oregon. This EA documents the site-specific analysis conducted by an interdisciplinary team to determine the potential environmental effects connected to a proposal of salvage harvest, reforestation, and temporary road construction. The EA is tiered to the "Umatilla National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS)" and Record of Decision (ROD), dated June 11, 1990.

The Rock Hard planning area is located approximately 9 to 14 air miles northeast of Ukiah, Oregon. It covers approximately 11,200 acres and is within the Bridge Creek, West Birch Creek, Bear Creek and Snipe Creek sub-watersheds. The legal description includes all or portions of: T.3S., R.31E., Section 36; T.3S., R.32E., Sections 12-14, 20-24, 26-29 and 32-34; T.4S., R.32E., Sections 4-9 and 16-18; Willamette Meridian, Umatilla County, Oregon.

## KEY ISSUES

Through discussions involving Forest Service resource specialists, state agencies, and members of the public, the following key issues were identified within the project area:

1. **Stand Health**

Vegetative Conditions. Many of the grand fir/Douglas-fir dominated stands in the project area have experienced catastrophic mortality due to epidemic levels of insects and diseases associated with drought and stress caused by high stand densities. In addition, some stands that were previously dominated by ponderosa pine and western larch have become dominated by shade tolerant species (grand fir/Douglas-fir) due to past management of selective harvest and fire exclusion. These two conditions have resulted in stands which may not be sustainable in vigor, resiliency, and productivity. The current trend is moving much of the area away from the Desired Future Condition described in the Forest Plan. Actions are needed to prevent further degradation of forest health and sustainability.

Fire. The occurrence and effects of natural fires in all of the stand types has been altered because of the elimination of fire (either natural or prescribed). Throughout the planning area, the available fuels are well above their natural range of variability. This increase in fuels has changed the fuel model throughout the planning area, setting up the potential for large, catastrophic, stand replacement fires.

2. Rocky Mountain Elk and Deer Habitat

Rocky Mountain Elk are the indicator species for general forest and winter range habitat (includes deer). Although total numbers of elk appear to be "on track" with management objectives established by Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, the number of bulls per 100 cows and calves per 100 cows has been below objectives for several years.

Factors other than habitat condition currently influence elk numbers and herd composition. Densities of open roads, vehicular traffic and harassment during the hunting season contribute to non-hunt mortality and stress among both bulls and cows. Although various management techniques have recently been applied to enhance the bull and calf to cow ratios, open road densities within the analysis area have been identified as a concern in some subwatersheds. Ineffective road closures are allowing access to areas identified for big game security and escapement.

Another concern is the adjacency of newly created openings to open roads, especially roads which are open during the hunting seasons.

## DECISION

Based on the results of the analysis documented in the EA, it is my decision to implement a modification of Alternative 2.

Alternative 2 was developed to recover timber resources from high priority salvage opportunity stands, to promote seral species on sites that naturally were maintained in seral species, to promote healthier and more sustainable stand conditions, to reduce fuel loadings, to meet PACFISH standards for riparian habitat conservation areas (RHCAs), and to meet the intent of the ECOSCREENS. Eighty-four percent of the volume is made up of disease and insect infested, dead, damaged or down trees. Thirteen percent is classified as imminently susceptible to insect attack and the remaining 3 percent are associated trees. The associated trees will be harvested to provide access and in some cases to create openings for the reforestation of ponderosa pine.

Approximately 1.5 MMBF of timber would be harvested from 728 acres through the use of ground based logging systems. Approximately 480 harvested acres would be planted with conifers specific to local site conditions. There would be approximately 0.77 mile of temporary road construction. No new specified road construction or specified road reconstruction would be required. New temporary roads would be obliterated following timber harvest activities. Post-harvest open road density would be unchanged from current levels.

**A change in mitigation to Alternative 2 that I have decided to implement is:**

In the special treatment areas around Category 2 streams, harvesting with track mounted equipment that provides full suspension of logs may be allowed to operate. Trails should follow the contour of the slope when possible.

## RATIONALE FOR THE DECISION

The criteria I used in arriving at my decision were:

Salvage dead and dying timber resources to recover some of the wood fiber and economic benefits.

Move elements and processes currently outside their natural range of variability back to a condition that is more sustainable.

Conserve or enhance riparian areas that contribute both now and in the future to the long-term viability of riparian habitats, and the local populations of species that use those habitats.

Maintain or enhance ecosystem functions to provide for long term stability and productivity of biological communities.

The selected alternative meets all my decision criteria well. It begins the immediate restoration of 728 acres within the 11,200 acre Rock Hard Planning Area. This would allow the removal of 1.5 million board feet (MMBF) of timber which will help meet commodity outputs as described in the Forest Plan. Salvage of these dead, down and dying trees and down woody material will make an important contribution to the Umatilla Forest's Timber Sale Program.

## HOW ISSUES ARE RESOLVED IN THE DECISION

1. Stand Health.

Vegetative Conditions. This alternative is a combination of salvage harvest, prescribed burning, and artificial and natural regeneration; along with associated actions. The key focus of this alternative from a silvicultural standpoint is the removal of dead trees to facilitate prescribed burning for site preparation and reforestation activities. Only grand and Douglas-fir species will be removed, leaving a mosaic of openings.

The combination of harvesting dead and dying fir and preparing the site will create conditions of light and site disturbance that favor the establishment of seral species. Reforestation is expected to occur much quicker than with the No Action alternative.

Of the 728 acres proposed for treatment, 297 acres are in cool grand fir plant association stands. The expected post-treatment conditions of these stands are 86 acres shelterwood and 211 acres seed tree cut. The desired future condition for these stands is to provide a larger component of disease resistant species and density levels appropriate for the sites. A lower range of density levels should provide for healthier stands of mixed species while providing marginal and satisfactory cover. Standing and down dead/dying grand fir and Douglas-fir (in excess of North Fork John Day Ranger District guidelines for snags/green tree replacements) will be removed. This will reduce the overstocked conditions and open the stands up enough to regenerate with fir as well as seral species. Species composition will be improved to better attain desired future conditions. Openings created will be reforested in a timely manner and Forest Plan stocking requirements will be met. The long term health and resiliency of these stands will be improved across the landscape.

Of the 728 acres proposed for treatment, 431 acres are in warm grand fir plant association stands. The expected post-treatment conditions of these stands are 324 acres shelterwood and 107 acres seed tree cut. On these sites, dead/dying grand fir and Douglas-fir will be removed as well as some thinning of green fir trees to begin moving these stands back into their natural range of species composition. The primary focus is on promoting and re-establishing ponderosa pine and western larch as the dominant tree species, as well as creating a stand structure that more closely resembles historical ranges. The stand treatment will reduce the overstocked conditions and open the stand up enough to regenerate with seral species as

well as fir. Douglas-fir and grand fir will continue to have a presence in these stands, but will take a more subordinate role in the species composition. Moving these stands back into their natural range for species composition and stocking will create healthier stands for the long term and allow stands as a whole to be more resilient in the event of future natural disturbances.

Fire. This alternative would generate 728 acres requiring activity fuels treatment. Of this, 154 acres would be broadcast burned and the remaining 574 acres would be treated with either a concentration or underburn. This alternative treats all the proposed timber sale units, which would result in a fuels reduction as well as breaking up the concentrations of the dead/dying Douglas-fir/grand fir stands that are a risk (Fuel model G). As a result this alternative has the greatest potential to reduce the overall fire hazard that presently exists throughout the planning area, while moving the fuels profiles towards a state more easily maintained through periodic spring and fall underburning.

2. **Rocky Mountain Elk and Deer Habitat**

Some areas within the project area have been identified as having sufficient habitat to provide elk (and deer) a somewhat secure site to escape to when disturbed from high vehicular traffic on roads throughout the year and during hunting activities. Although open road densities would be increased in these areas during salvage harvest operations, more effective road closures have been identified which would enhance habitat effectiveness in that local area.

When harvest is completed, elk vulnerability is not expected to increase over the current condition with the exception of portions of nine harvest units which are parallel to open roads. This is approximately 3.2 linear miles. Mitigation measures designed to offset this increase in elk vulnerability are presented in Chapter II of the EA. More effective road closures will be implemented on several roads. Worn down berms will likely be replaced with gates or road guards. This will allow administrative use of the area and reduce road violations.

Open road densities will be temporarily higher during harvest (likely summer and fall seasons) from the construction and use of 0.77 mile of temporary road. After harvest is complete, monitoring will indicate if additional road closures will need to be implemented. If not, open road densities will remain the same as they are currently, 2.03 mi/sq.mi.

Implementation of mitigation measures, District snag and green tree replacement guidelines, Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines, and requirements in the Screens Amendment will reduce impacts to wildlife and provide management options for the future.

## OTHER ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

**Alternative 1: (No Action) No management actions would take place to change the current conditions; natural processes would continue on resources in the planning area. Only those activities allowed under prior Analysis and Decision documents would occur.**

## PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Scoping was initially conducted on the North Fork John Day Ranger District through the solicitation of issues from members of the Rock Hard Interdisciplinary Team (IDT), Technical Support Team, District Staff, and the public. Information was gathered at meetings held in the district office and in the project area.

Scoping for this project area began in 1991 as part of the Camas Salvage Planning area. Three District open house sessions were held; as well as newspaper notices, a news release, and letters to interested groups and individuals providing information on the project. More specifically to the Rock Hard planning area, on May 2, 1996 a scoping letter was sent to interested groups and individuals, asking for comments and concerns about the proposed action. The Rock Hard planning area has also been included in the Spring 1996 quarterly edition of the Umatilla National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions.

Several letters of response from the public were received. Generally, most of the concern expressed was related to improving forest health in a timely manner, protecting water quality for fish habitat, using a diverse approach to achieve forest health, and providing big game security. Letters received from project scoping and public involvement are contained in the Rock Hard Analysis File.

## MITIGATION MEASURES

The mitigation measures that were developed reflect existing direction found in the Umatilla Land and Resource Management Plan and program direction established on the Forest. The specific mitigation measures that would be implement in the Rock Hard Planning Area are listed on pages 10-16 of the EA.

## MONITORING

Activities and their effects, including effectiveness of mitigation measures, would be monitored. In addition to Forest-level monitoring, the specific monitoring activities that would be performed in the Rock Hard planning area are listed on pages 16-18 of the EA.

## SITE-SPECIFIC FOREST PLAN AMENDMENT

It is my decision to implement the following adjustments under the authority of 36 CFR 219.10. The changes have been determined not to be significant for purpose of the planning process and represent a non-significant amendment to the Umatilla National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan. This amendment was analyzed and documented within the EA for this project, completing the necessary NEPA procedures and the associated public notification required under CFR 219.10.

Alternative 2 is not consistent with the Forest Plan standards and guidelines in Management Areas C3, C4, and E2 due to the large scale insect infestation and past harvest activities. The Forest Plan is based on healthy forest conditions. My decision to issue this site specific, non-significant Forest Plan amendment will not alter the desired future condition in these management areas. This amendment is as follows:

Habitat Effectiveness Index (HEI)

In management area C3, big game winter range, Forest Plan standards and guidelines require a Habitat Effectiveness Index (HEI) no less than 70. This planning area does not meet this requirement currently, and under this alternative will likely not meet this requirement for 50 years. The Forest Plan is amended by allowing an exemption from this standard (Forest Plan 4-152) for the Rock Hard Planning Area.

In management area C4, wildlife habitat, Forest Plan standards and guidelines require an HEI of no less than 60. This project area does not meet this requirement currently, and under this alternative will likely not meet this requirement for 40 years. The Forest Plan is amended by allowing an exemption from this standard (Forest Plan 4-159) for the Rock Hard Planning Area.

In management area E2, timber and big game, Forest Plan standards and guidelines require an HEI of no less than 45. This project area does not meet this requirement currently, and under this alternative will likely not meet this requirement for 30 years. The Forest Plan is amended by allowing an exemption from this standard (Forest Plan 4-159) for the Rock Hard Planning Area.

Big Game Hiding Cover

In management area E2, timber and big game, Forest Plan standards and guidelines require a minimum of 10 percent of the area provide satisfactory cover, with a minimum of 30 percent of the area providing total cover (marginal and satisfactory). Satisfactory cover does not currently meet this requirement, and under this alternative will likely not meet this requirement for 50 years. Total cover does not currently meet the minimum requirement, but under this alternative is expected to meet it in 30 years. The Forest Plan is amended by allowing an exemption from this standard (Forest Plan 4-183) for the Rock Hard Planning Area.

## NFMA CONSISTENCY

Any project proposed for implementation has to meet the requirements of the National Forest Management Act (NFMA). In accordance with these requirements, I conclude from the results of site-specific analysis documented in the Environmental Assessment and Analysis File that:

> The modified alternative documented in this Decision Notice is consistent with the Umatilla National Forest Land Resource Management Plan and Record of Decision dated June 11, 1990, including Forest Plan amendment 8 and 11 (PACFISH AND the REVISED SCREENS), and is in compliance with the requirements of 36 CFR 219.27.

## DATES AND INFORMATION

This decision will be implemented immediately to facilitate Forest rehabilitation and recovery in the Blue Mountains and to capture the economic benefit from dead timber.

This decision for the Rock Hard qualified as a salvage sale as described in the provisions of subsection 2001(e) of Public Law 104-19. Under that legislation, salvage sales are not subject to the provision of the appeal regulations of 36 CFR 215.

The documents and procedures required for the preparation, advertisement, offering, awarding, and operation of these salvage sales shall be deemed to satisfy the requirements of the applicable environmental laws as listed in subsection 2001(i) of Public Law 104-19.

This decision is subject to judicial review only in the United States district court for the district in which the affected Federal lands are located. As required under section 2001(f)(1) of Public Law 104-19, any challenge to this salvage sale project must be filed in the district court within 15 days after the advertisement of the sale.

For further information, contact Craig Smith-Dixon, District Ranger, North Fork John Day Ranger District, P.O. Box 158, Ukiah, Oregon 97880 or at (541) 427-3231.

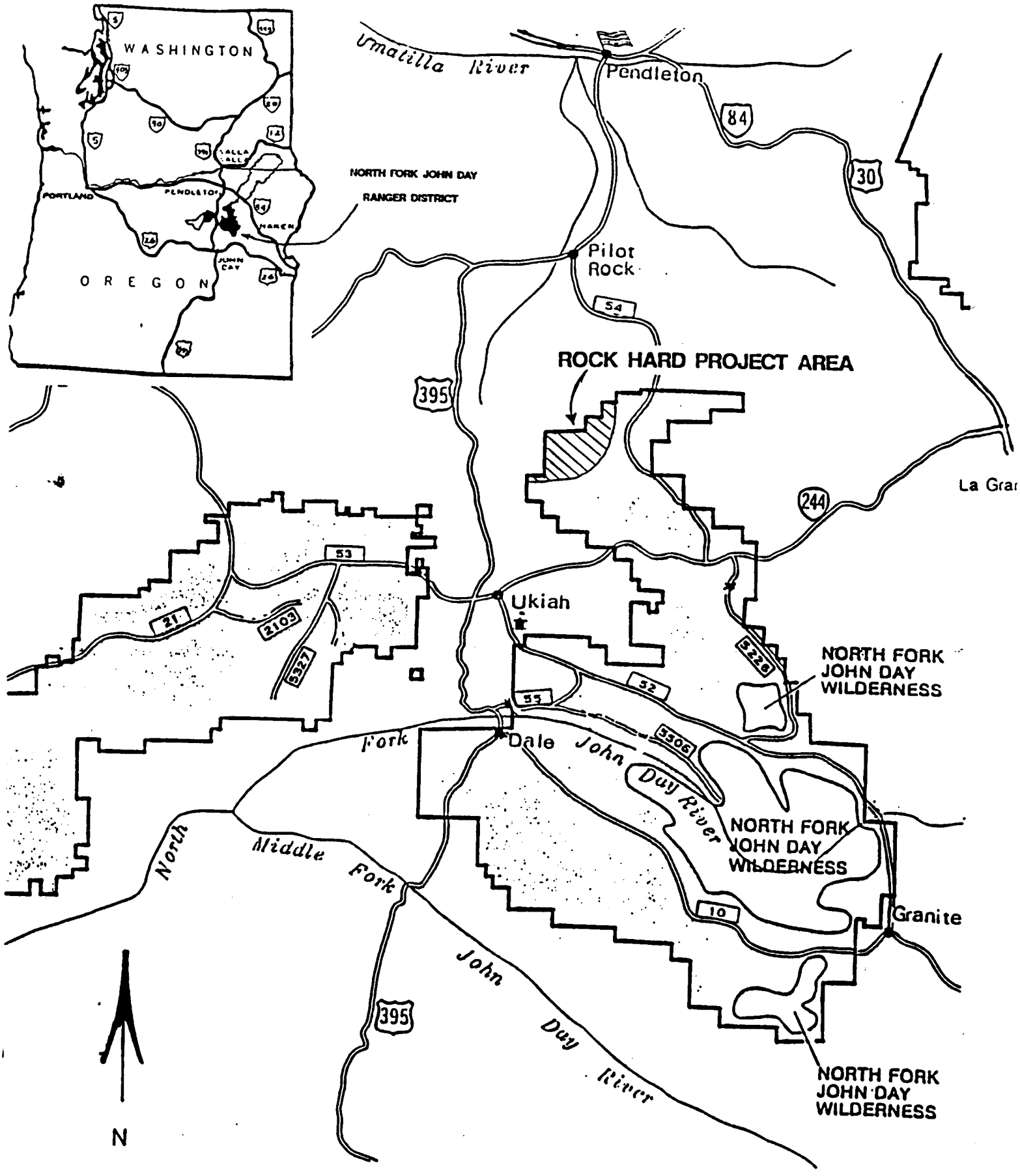
Thomas K Reilly

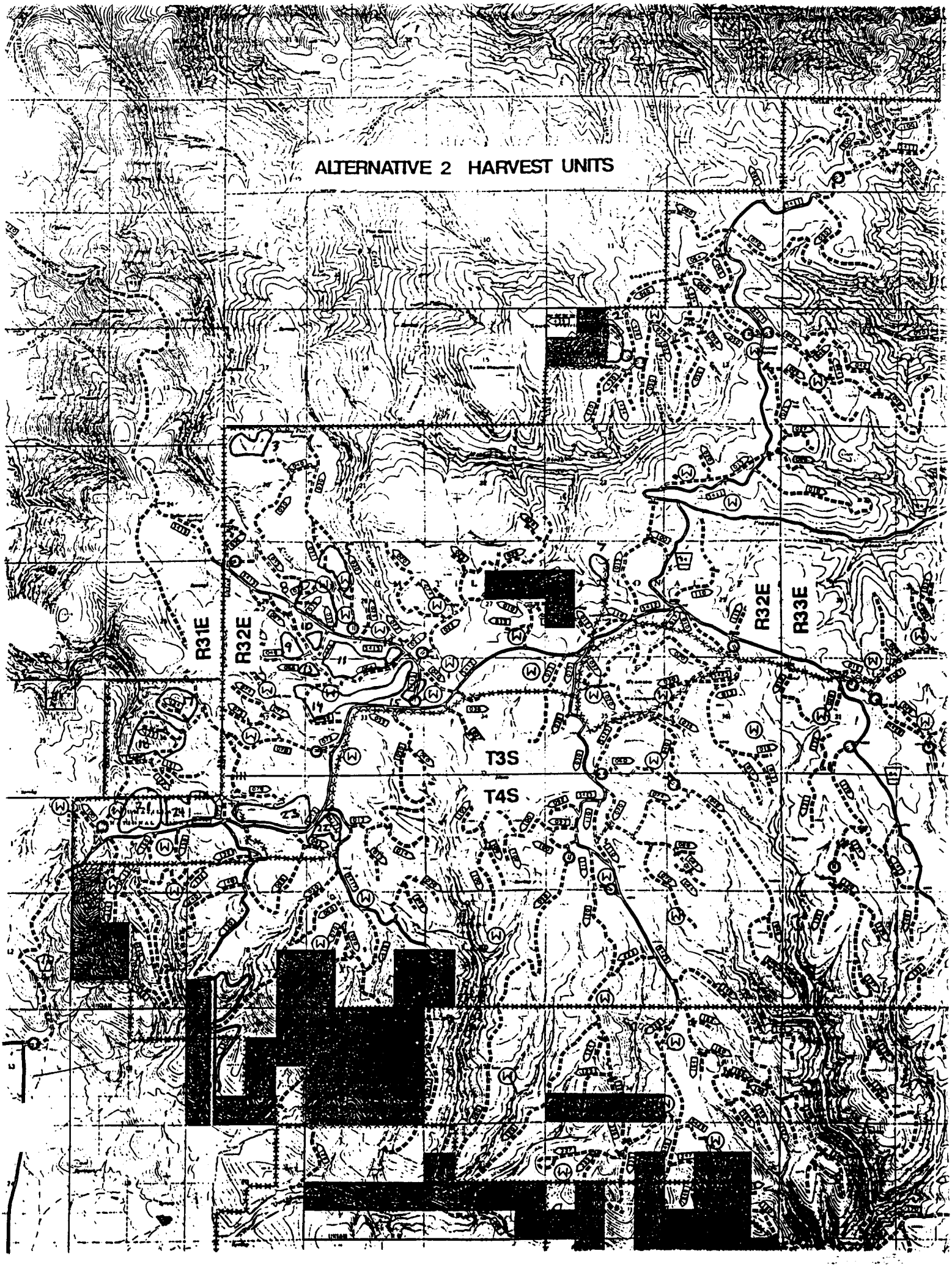
THOMAS K. REILLY
Acting Forest Supervisor

10/2/96
Date

Enclosures (2)
Project Area Map
Response to Substantive Public Comments

# NORTH FORK JOHN DAY
# VICINITY MAP




ALTERNATIVE 2 HARVEST UNITS
R31E
R32E
R32E
R33E
T3S
T4S

## RESPONSE TO SUBSTANTIVE PUBLIC COMMENT

As part of the comment review and analysis process, the Interdisciplinary Team identified substantive comments on the Environmental Assessment (EA). Comments were grouped by subject matter and summarized. Comments were extracted from the letters and may or may not be paraphrased; attempts were made to accurately capture and display each substantive comment. The Forest Service response follows each comment.

Comment 1: Are the Townsend's big-eared bats and the Pacific western big-eared bat the same?

Response: Yes they are. The Federal Register lists two bats as sensitive (Plecotus townsendii townsendii [Pacific Townsend's western big-eared bat] and Plecotus townsendii pallescens [Pale Townsend's western big-eared bat]) so a more general term that covers both bats would be the Townsend's big-eared bat. In the biological evaluation the determination was made that this activity may impact individuals or habitat but will not likely contribute to trend towards federal listing or cause a loss of viability to the population or species.